



The Distance Between Us



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Chapter 1 by Annie Sulpizio

Over time, the beach has been the most dreadful place for me. It wasn't at some point. The memories that come to my head tears away at me. It should have been me, not her. Why her?

Huntington Beach 2010

"Come on! It'll be fine!" Ari was my world. 5'2, blue eyes, Brunette hair. She was perfect.

Chapter 2 by -



We walked along the beach. The waves slapping our feet with salt water, and the sand tickling our toes. We held each other close and sang into the fresh sea air, listening to the wind carry it among the rocks.

If only I had known that would be our last moment standing together in a tender embrace!

By that thought, I have been tormented. Why had I not taken precautions?

I grabbed Ari's hand and we headed up a path of steep rocks. The view was picturesque as the sun shone over the deep blue. But a scene that would be marred in my life.

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Chapter 3 by Stan Johnson

The day was perfect, exactly what I needed. I had been waiting for this day, in early spring, and the beach was as close to deserted as I'd seen it. We even staked out a parking spot and a fire

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pit without even trying. It was weird to see the lifeguard towers empty, and only the occasional lifeguard truck serving to remind us that anyone was still watching.

I wish *someone* beside me had been watching; things may have been different otherwise.

Instead, my perfect plans continued blissfully ahead, completely blind to the future. After a little time on the path, I took her back to the beach. e walked the pier, and spent time gazing out over the ocean from directly above it.

I still recall the last minute before she died--before that wooden plank gave way and she... I have to close my mind against a memory that's burned so deeply into my subconscious that I can't forget it no matter how hard I try.

One minute before her death. We stop, not five feet from where she fell. I pull her into my arms, and let my eyes take her in, from head to toe and back again. I spend what feels like forever lost in those eyes. I see her chin come up, her lips pucker ever so slightly, and she half-closes her eyes. I close mine and breathe her in, feeling her warmth against me as I press in to kiss her. It still feels like the first time, and I want it to last forever.

I get so lost in the kiss that when we finally separate, I forget where we are.

Thirty seconds before her death. She moves in for one more, quick kiss.

Twenty seconds before her death. We turn to gaze out over the ocean as the sun sinks behind Catalina, a brilliant ball of fire on the cool blue of the Pacific. I trace the faint clouds with my eyes as my fingers traces curly-ques along her side. I tell myself I will be with this girl until death do us part. I merely need to get the courage to ask. Who cares if we're still "too young" to get married?

Three seconds before her death. I turn and take her hand to lead her back toward the beach. She grips my hand tight, then lets go and dashes away down the pier and toward the sand, daring me to chase her with a laugh

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the pier hard, rolling over and over and over. I watch her head collide with the railing as she slides past it and out into open space. I feel my heart implode as she hovers in the air for a tortuous moment, and then drops...

And now I'm in the present, screaming to get the image out of my head. Life hasn't stopped for me. But what is there to live for without Ari?

Deep inside, I fear that if I can't answer that question soon, I may find myself joining her before I'm really ready.

Chapter 4 by Stan Johnson



The knock on my door resonated in my head. I pulled a pillow over my face, and rolled over. "David?" It was Mom. Always Mom. I love her dearly, but she just won't leave me alone.

"David? It's noon. I know it's summer, but we've still got rules in this house. I need you up."

Was it even worth it to answer? Before I made up my mind I heard my door click open. Great. I'd seen this coming; every morning since... that time... seemed to be the same.

"Get dressed, David," she said simply. The calm of her tone made me wary. Lately, she'd been on my case more and more, once the initial sympathy for my loss had worn off.

"I'm good," I muttered.

"No," she said softly, "you're not. And I'm not. Look, David--I'm so very, very sorry about Ari--"

"I don't want to talk about this, Mom."

--because I loved her too. I know you wanted to marry her. And--"

"Mom. *Stop.*"

"...and we already thought of her as a daughter. But David? It's time to start the healing. It's been four months."

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she believed in it more than me. If it hadn't been for the thought that I wouldn't go to Heaven when I died, too, I'd have joined her that day on the pier.

Cue the flashbacks, of course.

"David?" Oh, right. Mom's still here. "Your appointment is in a half an hour. It's just enough time for you to dress and for us to drive there. Traffic should be light."

I shook my head. "I'm not going."

"I'll be in the car." I heard her get up and walk away.

"I said I'm not going!" So why was I sliding out of bed and reaching for my shirt? Was I seriously going to let Mom take me to a shrink? I couldn't do therapy. Therapy isn't about healing--it's about making me forget I had been hurt. It'll be about making me forget Ari; that is something that will *never* happen.

Well, I won't let it happen. I'll be just fine taking care of myself.

Chapter 5 by Stan Johnson



I feel a little bad for Mom. I mean, she's probably paying for this visit to the shrink. But I don't *need* help. What I need is Ari. So when Mom leaves to run errands after checking me in for my appointment, I fake a trip to the bathroom, and walk out a side door. I don't care how many college degrees the psychiatrist has; she'll *never* understand what my loss feels like.

And so I walk, alone with my thoughts.

I walk until my legs are as numb as my heart. Somehow, I manage to cross streets without getting myself killed, though I honestly wouldn't mind it. Then, almost before I know it, I find myself in a place I never wanted to be in. I swallow hard at the sight of row upon row of headstones jutting from freshly cut grass. Balloons, flowers, and even multi-colored lights are propped up on the cold stone markers—as if the people beneath them would even care

I know Ad doesn't. She's gone. Or See more of Story Wars

Still, I find her headstone

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to matching her innocence and beauty. I can't help the tears that sting my eye, nor the flood of memories. Those

long walks, talking to her, hearing that musical laugh, seeing those deep, gorgeous eyes, tasting those lips.

All of it... gone... And only myself to blame.

I need to make a decision. I either live with the pain of her absence, or I die. I don't *want* to die, but I can't help but think that I deserve it. Besides, if I were to die in a cemetery, it'd save my parents the trouble of hauling my worthless corpse here. They could just dig a hole and toss me in, and then at least justice would be served.

So it's decided. I empty my pockets, looking for something that will do the trick. Phone, wallet, house key. I growl. Nothing. But... but there are *plenty* of things at home.

I'm coming, Ari. I'll do my best to aim for Heaven when I go. Please talk to the gatekeeper and see if he'll let me in even if I deserve the exact opposite.

Chapter 6 by -



I open the garage door quietly. It is dark inside, but I can't turn on the lights, it may alert the home to my presence. But I have to find the rope before mom arrives back home...

Click. The garage light flicker on. I turn my head and see mom standing at the entrance.

"Mom I thought --" She steps up to me and takes the cord from my shaking hands. She throws it across the room and takes me in her arms. It wasn't Ari's sweet embrace, but I must admit, it felt good to be hugged. To feel wanted.

I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to keep back the tears which threatened to pour out. "Mom I... I am... *so* sorry..." Her arms tightened as she kissed my cheek.

"We're going to help you through this son. We love you. /love you..."

After many minutes of crying, we walked into the house, hand in hand. I realized then, that now my duty was to my family. *They still needed me.*

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Chapter 7 by -

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The next morning, we all sat at the table. Just three of us. It brought back memories of my early childhood. Of life *before* Ari.

Times when dad and I would come in hot and sweaty from playing baseball. And mom would make us fresh lemonade.

Or days when mom and I would spend hours at the mall, shopping for new sneakers and sports equipment.

And then there were those days when we would all head to the lake. Dad and I would fish while mom baked in the sun's warmth. Afterwards we would barbecue at home.

Those were the times before I became infatuated with the love of my life. When i stopped interacting much with my parents. When i lost sight of the fact that they too, wanted to see me. That I was still their only child, and that they loved me just as much as Ari.

Sitting around the dining room table made me realize that we could be close again. That I could still love...

Chapter 8 by -



Over the next couple months, my aching heart healed and I learned to love again. I realized that it was not about myself and how I could satisfy my desires, but rather how i could be a blessing to my family and help them out.

I learned that there is more to life than finding a soul mate. There is more to life than living for self. There is more to life than pleasure.

Not everyone can live the "American Dream" of prosperity, popularity, and perfection. In fact, the majority of people never will.

And this is what made me see that, yes Ari was pure beauty in my eyes, she was the dearest thing to me, but I had let her get in the way of my responsibilities and duties. My priorities were all wrong. I had been living for me and what would make me happy, instead of thinking of her life.

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